# The Line Between Smack Talk and Cyberbullying

Community Otter May 8, 2020

When I first heard the term “smack talk,” I thought it sounded synonymous with “bullying.” I later learned that I was taking it too literal—it’s not so much verbal pummeling as it is a form of banter. Most prevalent in gaming situations (sports, tabletop, video games), smack talk nevertheless can come across as more abusive than boisterous.

At its most innocuous form, smack talk comes across as mild jabs and boasts: “I could win this game in my sleep.” But as it gets more personal, that line between banter and bullying blurs: “I’m here to play not carry you, scrub.”

Ouch.

Reading that as text, without any of the intonation of the back-and-forth an in-person game might provide, makes it easy to take the words at face value. While the term “scrub” is an insult, the person sending it might not necessarily mean it to be offensive. It all comes down to tone.

## Reading by ear.

Let’s read that second sentence as if it were happening face-to-face.

“I’m here to play.” He paused to catch his breath before jogging past with a grin. “I’m not here to carry you. Scrub.”

Not too bad! Here it is again with a negative tone:

“I’m here to play, not carry *you*,” he sneered, crossing his arms and turning away. “Scrub.”

Not very nice.

For me, it’s tempting to read banter from a stranger as unkind. That kind of joking around is something I might do with friends—with people whose limits I know and who know mine. And even if we did read that sentence with the lighter, friendlier tone, it can still feel uncomfortable. After all, this person is a stranger. It would be like someone at the gym laughing at your mile time.

Again, it’s difficult to know what their true intentions are. That’s why if you ever feel uncomfortable by something another player says or does, you have the option to mute that individual, block them, or even report them. You may feel uncertain or hesitant about reporting another gamer, but remember you are helping make the community safer and more welcoming. An enforcement expert will see your report and determine what action to take. By bringing the event/content to Xbox’s attention, you are not getting the other person in trouble—rather, you are helping to put a stop to trouble.

There is also the option to engage with the person starting the smack talk, if you feel comfortable doing so. The other player is starting a dialogue, and so long as it “focuses on the game at hand and encourages healthy competition,” it could lead to an ultimately positive experience (Xbox Community Standards). Joke around, tease them back, keep it tasteful.

## Tell them how you feel!

And should they cross a line, you should feel empowered to tell them that you felt they went too far. Once the person hears you out, they can explain what they meant or apologize. Communication is a two-way street with potholes of misunderstanding. It might not always be a stranger either—remember to let your friends know too if they overstep a boundary they weren't aware of.

You can learn more about the Mute and Block features on Xbox here. For more about how to report another player, a message(s) from them, or other content, visit this Xbox Support article.